

This April just after Easter I attended a workshop called Missional Voices, a weekend gathering for thinking, planning, and dreaming about the future of missional communities and innovative ministries in The Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion. One of the sessions was on the Jesus Movement and Episcopal evangelism, something that Presiding Bishop has been talking a lot about since his installation in November 2015. Now Bishop Curry is well aware of the magnitude of what he is up against in putting those two words together – Episcopal and evangelism. He admits there's sure fire way to strike terror in the heart of an Episcopalian – tell them they need to go out and witness or evangelize after church. That'll take 'em out for sure, he says.¹

So he, his staff, and various task forces and working groups of people from all over the Episcopal Church have been starting to flesh out this whole idea of the Jesus Movement and what it means to be an Episcopal evangelist. What is emerging is this: If the spirit of the Jesus Movement is about following Jesus into a loving, liberating, live-giving relationship with God, each other and all of creation, then Episcopal evangelism is about welcoming people into that same loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is about seeking, naming, and celebrating Jesus' loving presence in the stories of all people and then inviting them to MORE – more dialogue, more reflection, more Christian community, more of seeing God at work in themselves, in us, and in the world.²

Well, we've been talking a fair bit about evangelism here at St. Andrew's for the last few years too. In December 2015, we embarked on some strategic planing that had marketing and evangelism as one of its major emphases. Our vestry retreat in January was dedicated to the topic of evangelism, and that same month I struck terror in your all's hearts when I asked you to do an exercise during the sermon time called "cardboard testimonials." It turned out ok, and I dare say some of you even enjoyed it! If you remember we were invited to write down on one side of a piece of cardboard a word or a phrase representing a struggle you'd experienced in our life, and on the other side a word or phrase the captured how God was present to you in that struggle and brought you through it (that was then; this is now). If I remember correctly about 10 of you brave souls even stood up to share your cardboard tesimonial. Then in April we launched our Crossroads Learning Community, which is meeting for the second time today after church (there's still

time!). So we're all working on how to reclaim that maligned term "evangelism" in a distinctly Episcopal and distinctly Jesus-like way.

In today's Gospel lesson, we are reminded of one of the reasons we are doing this... because Jesus told us to. Jesus told his disciples this is what it means to be his follower – to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. He'd been teaching them all along, sending them out, giving them practice, showing them what it means to be a living breathing God bearer in the world, and now he tells them to "go," promising to be with them to the end of the ages. This was their commissioning, or better yet, their "co-missioning"³ with Jesus to bear God's loving, liberating, and life-giving presence in the world.

The promise of God's presence is one of the significant messages of the Gospel of Matthew. It both begins and ends with it. From when the Angel appears to Joseph in a dream and calls Jesus 'Emmanuel,' God with us, to the end of the Gospel with Jesus' very last words, "I am with you always to the end of the age." I am with you.

What we learn of this promise, however, is that it has very specific content. In the sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, the poor in spirit." Later when he sent his disciples on a practice mission, he told them to "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, and drive out demons." Then just before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus told his disciples feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, tend the sick, and visit the imprisoned, for whenever they did this for others they would be serving Jesus himself, and whenever they neglected to do this for others they would be neglecting Jesus himself. In other words, their mission was to share and bear the all-embracing love and presence of God.

What we learn at the end of the Gospel, however, is that this mission has undergone a significant change – a change that was foreshadowed in the listing of four gentile women in the genealogy of Jesus that begins Matthew's gospel. You may recall that when Jesus sent the disciples out on that first practice mission, he specifically told them not to go to the Gentiles, but instead only to "the lost sheep, the people of Israel." Later, Jesus even told a Canaanite woman when she asked him to heal her daughter that it was not right to take

children's food and throw it to the dogs. Her faith, her wit, her desperation, her persistence, led her to come back at Jesus with a game-changing quip, "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall off the master's table," and so now, Jesus commands his disciples to go specifically to the Gentiles – to the foreigners, those who are different from them. Jesus tells the disciples to extend beyond themselves to places and people unknown to them, even those they fear and reject. In sending them out to the far reaches of all that was considered socially and religiously acceptable, Jesus signaled the rupture once and for all of any and all boundaries that might be used to separate people from the love of God.

I remember a story told by Fred Craddock about an old man and his childhood as one of "those" people a long time ago. His story was this: "I was a born not far from here [from Gatlinburg], out from the village of Cosby, in a place called Laurel Springs. My mother was not married. The children at school made fun of me. I ate my lunch alone. I hid during recess because they said ugly things to me. When I went to town, people looked at my mother and me. I just figured they were trying to make guesses as to who was my father. So I had a very painful childhood. In the course of it, I started going – about middle school age – to Laurel Springs Christian Church back in the woods; it had kerosene lamps. There was an old preacher there with a long beard, a chiseled face, and a deep voice. I liked to hear him preach but I didn't want to be embarrassed, so I would just go for the sermon and rush out. I did that for some time.

One day some of the people gathered in the aisle, and I couldn't get by, and I felt this hand on my shoulder, and I looked around and I could see the face and the beard of the preacher. I was scared to death because I was always afraid of being embarrassed in public. He stared at me as though he was trying to guess what man in the community was my father. After he looked at me carefully, he said, 'Boy you are a child of...' He paused there. I just froze. 'Boy, you are a child of...God. I see a striking resemblance.' He swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Go claim your inheritance.' That was really the first day of my life."⁴

Go, claim your inheritance. That right there is the heart of what Jesus is inviting us to be part of – to be a part of inviting people to claim their inheritance as children of God, as those who experience themselves to be loved, liberated, and full of life. Contrary to how the Great Commission can be – and frankly has been – interpreted through the ages – as an

imperialistic, colonizing, homogenizing imposition on people whether they want it or not, this co-missioning is about bearing the presence of God that people might claim their inheritance, especially to those whose God-given inheritance has been denied, squandered or stolen, sometimes by the very people who claim to be Jesus' own followers.

We know from scripture that this boundary-breaking mission did not come easily for the disciples, and we know today that it does not come easily for us. It is hard not to imagine in our zero-sum, scarcity-driven world that some other peoples' gain is not our loss – even when we are talking about the infinite and eternal love of God. We all have our “others,” each and every one of us, and yet Jesus shows his followers over and over again how to trust, experience, exist within that infinite, eternal, all-embracing love of God.

That was the disciples' mission then, and it is our mission now. Jesus' death and resurrection ruptured once and for all any and all boundaries that might be used to separate people from the love of God, and it is our mission to make sure people know that. We have been co-missioned by and through Jesus Christ to share the presence of God in the world that all people everywhere, especially those to and from whom it has been denied, squandered, or stolen – that all people everywhere might have an opportunity to claim their inheritance – to claim their inheritance as children of this expansively, uncomprehendingly loving, liberating, life-giving God. “Go,” Jesus says, “and I will be with you through the end of the ages.”

¹ Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's Sermon Festival Holy Eucharist with Installation of Randolph Marshall Hollerith as 11th Dean of Cathedral. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T8XEczAxB94>

² Personal notes from the Jesus Movement Leadership Training at Missional Voices, April 20, 2017, “A Practical Theology of Episcopal Evangelism,” ECF Vital Practices for Congregations, by Steve Pankey, Andy Doyle, David Gortner, Nick Knisely and Stephanie Spellers. May 2017 <http://www.ecfvp.org/vestry-papers/article/613/a-practical-theology-of-episcopal-evangelism>

³ Amy-Jill Levine used this term in her paper “To All the Gentiles”: A Jewish Perspective on the Great Commission. *Review and Expositor*, 103, Winter 2006.

⁴ Craddock, October 2000, taped telephone conversation in *One Family, Under God, Indivisible*. Stevenson-Moessner, Jeanne, pp. 60-61.